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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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VISITING SCHEME

During preparations for the Protestant Assembly, it was Henri OCHSENBEIN who proposed that we should undertake some visiting. After the Protestant Assembly a team of men and women met to set the visiting-programme going. A large number of volunteers came forward. It was out of the question to take them all, and it was left to the Pastors to write personal letters to those parishioners who seemed to have the right gifts for visiting. Some of the old people who had volunteered were not invited to attend the preparatory meeting. Their intentions were good, but one could not ask them to go round the streets looking for addresses late in the evenings, nor to climb stairs.

So the first visiting-evening arrived. The team (about 30 people) met the two Pastors. Mr. Ochsenbein had agreed to introduce us and give us information for this work. As we shared a simple tea, we listened to the biblical basis, the passage in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:68, Luke 10:1-20 : "Jesus Christ the great visitor ..." "The Lord who tells his people 'go'".

The man responsible for training the "Visitors" gave us some practical advice for our first attempts. He also gave us some pamphlets for our information. How were we to introduce ourselves ? How were we to start a conversation ? What were we to say ? How were we to strike a deeper note ? The following points struck me as especially important :

- Before knocking at anyone's front door, offer a short prayer and feel certain that the Lord is entering before you.

- Introduce yourself not as a representative of the Pastor, but say "we come from your Church, from <u>your</u> congregation", stressing the word 'your'.

REFERAT FÜR EVANGELISATION · STUDIENABTEILUNG · OEKUMENISCHER RAT DER KIRCHEN

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- When starting a conversation, put your questions in such a way that the people you are visiting have to reply "yes", not "no".

- It is a good introduction to take an interest in the children of the family.

- It is natural that the people should receive you with some suspicion, and wonder what you are going to ask of them ! Say, "we have come simply to offer you our friendship".

- Don't forget to state your name and profession.

- Don't speak both at the same time, and don't carry on two conversations simultaneously.

- Above all, be a good listener !

After tea and a prayer, we set out, two by two, with the addresses that we were to visit. We felt a certain apprehension about knocking on the doors of our fellow-parishioners. How would they receive us ? What would they think of us ? Would they take us for representatives of some sect ?

Results of the first evening : general enthusiasm, satisfaction all round, and very lively report on our visits after we returned to the parish room.

The project was put on a permanent basis, and the team was anxious to continue.

A few words about running a visiting-scheme : At present we are visiting on two evenings every six weeks. We bear in mind the fact that the "Visitors" are all people with jobs, and that one must not encroach too much on their time. On visiting-evenings the programme is always the same :

1. Bible-reading,
2. Conversation and practical advice (tea; start visiting at 7 p.m.),
3. Visiting two by two until 9 p.m.,
4. Report in the presence of the pastors.

Periodical meetings with the parish leaders : Pastors, counsellers, Sisters, youth leaders and the Choir, concerning extending the visiting scheme, indicating names, etc.

Numerical results

Average number of visitors :	12 - 15
Number of visits per evening :	30 - 40
Total number of visits made up to the present :	600

Composition of the visiting teams : Municipal employees, one mathematician, nurses, social workers, laboratory workers, two doctors, one organ-manufacturer, six teachers (men and women), one student (among them three couples).

Results and Conclusion : One undeniable fact is clear : it works. It is not just a theory :

1. The laity realise their responsibility in the congregation. It is a service which the laity are able to fulfil. They bear the message of reconciliation.

2. The Visitor gets to know what the life of the parish really is. He gets to know the parishioners outside the solemn atmosphere of the Sunday service. He meets them in their everyday environment, within their family circle.

   He sees : a) what their material, social and family life really are,
   b) what their spiritual and moral life really are.

   He finds: c) that the men and women visited feel called outside the church-building.

   A visit is therefore a personal meeting with the Church in the everyday environment.

3. The "Visitor" realises what a tremendous task the Pastor has to do, and begins to understand that the Pastor cannot do everything single-handed. This is an awakening of the missionary responsibility of the congregation !

4. The layman is faced by the need to educate himself, to read, to inform himself, in order to prepare himself for visits. He must be especially well-informed about the sects, have some theological knowledge, know how to guide a conversation, and must complete his general culture.

5. The layman is therefore enriched by the human contacts, by his relations with other people

   - he is spiritually enriched because visiting necessitates places oneself entirely at God's disposal, in communion with Him through prayer and intercession;
   - he is also spiritually enriched through personal sanctification, in order to give better service in love for his Lord and his brother.

   He becomes a mature person - a responsible layman.

6. We are learning to form a team, to emerge from our reserve, our splendid isolation, our Protestant individualism. We are beginning to open our hearts to one another in brotherhood. We are learning to listen to "our neighbour".

7. Pastors and laity meet to undertake this joint task, with mutual respect and understanding. The Pastor loses his fear of the layman, and drops his "pastoral halo".

8. The visiting has repercussion on the deep understanding and meaning of the Sunday service and the liturgy. The whole congregation shares in these visits through the intercession at the end of the Sunday service. The "Visitor" sings the "Kyrie eleison" with greater understanding, including in it the families he has visited, the whole parish, the whole of Christendom. Attendance at the Sunday service will ultimately be one of the fruits of our visiting.

9. Lastly, one of the good results of the visiting-scheme is its contagious influence on relations between parishes, for instance in the Strasbourg district. A similar influence takes place between different regions (e.g. Buchs and Birsfelden) in Switzerland.

Present Prospects and Convictions :

- More visiting should be undertaken in our Church.
- There are not enough of us to visit the families regularly (importance of visiting in the new housing-estates).
- Visiting should be undertaken in all parishes.
- Week-ends and courses should be held for giving the "Visitors" some theological and spiritual training.
- The Pastors and elders should realise the importance of visiting and support it.
- In small parishes, the Pastor must exercise prudence and a great deal of tact.
- There are a great many psychological difficulties.
- One must find a person or persons whose spiritual and moral authority are uncontested, and who has the necessary tact and discretion.